



# Caesarius of Terracina

Texts and illustrations by **Giovanni Guida**

Translated and edited by **Kathleen Donahue**



*"Bonus homo iusta loquitur"*

To all those who place themselves at the service of their neighbor;

to all those who defend the sacredness and dignity of life;

to all those who have the courage to say what they think

**DONUM SANCTO CAESARIO DIACONO DEDICATUM**

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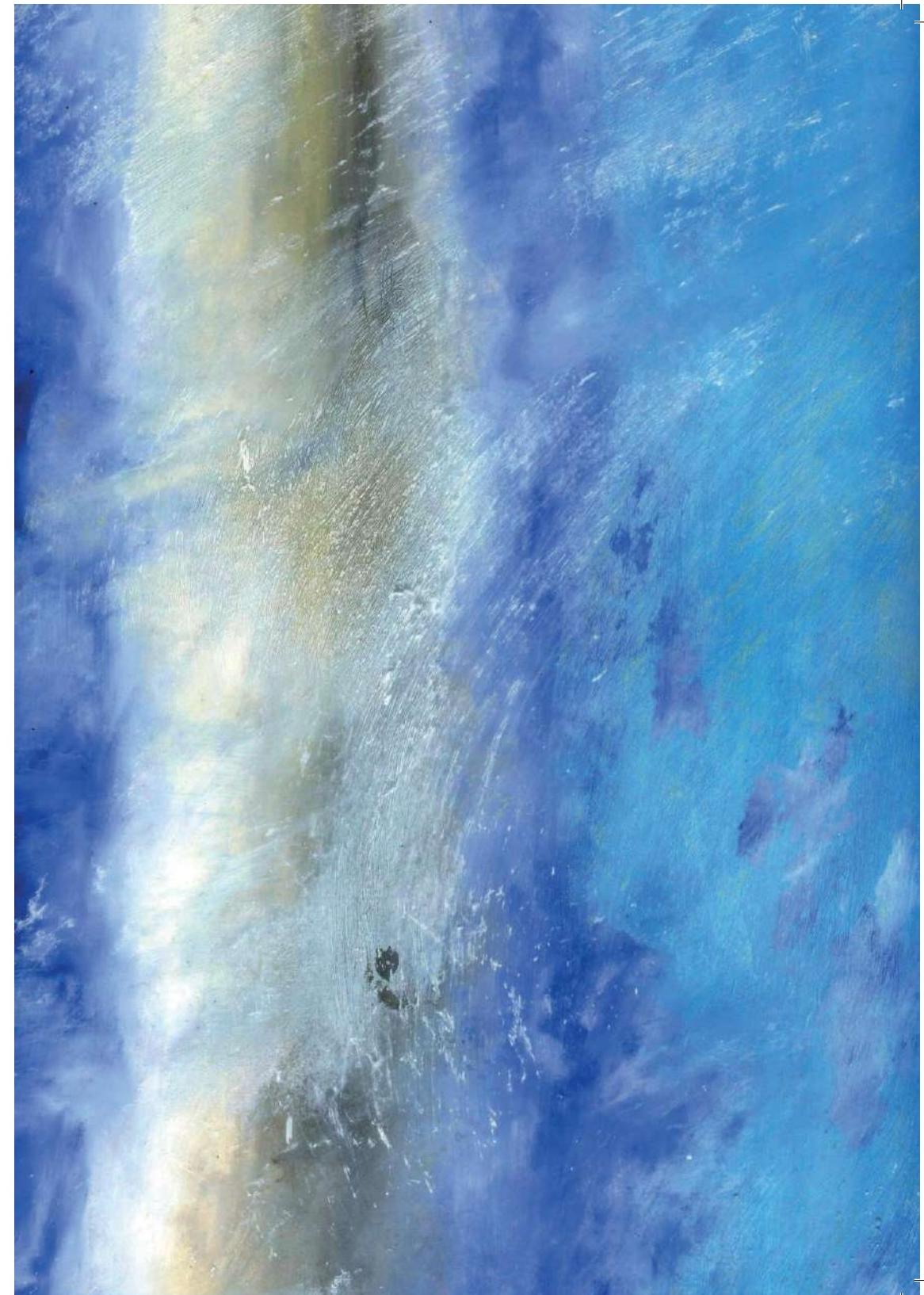
## Preface

The project “*Caesarius of Terracina*” was born from the desire to explore the rich history of Cesario, a young deacon martyred in Terracina at the beginning of the second century of the Christian era, and to create - through an iconographic study - a series of illustrations that retrace the most significant episodes in his life. *Caesarius* is a Latin name derived from Caesar that means "devoted to Caesar." This name is thus linked to the great Roman leader, Gaius Julius Caesar, and to the Roman emperors as their names were Caesar. Our deacon was, instead, a Christian Caesar opposed to the emperor's pagans. His "*Passio*," the ancient tale of martyrdom, contains both real and fantastic elements; we are talking about a real character acting in a context of altered or invented facts. However, the tale also contains historical elements: the name (Cesario), the place (Terracina), and the event (his martyrdom). In this book, we will try to make a comparison and differentiation between the different versions of the *Passio*, the hagiographic studies, and the various collected documents. In fact, over the centuries, several versions have been included in the original text interpolations due to irregular narrators and popular imagination which has enriched and embellished the story throughout the years. To begin recomposing the original elements of the story, we must explore all the paths that led to the formation of the various legends, being careful not generate further legendary variations, therefore fostering conjectures that have no scientific foundation and become mere fantasies. It is therefore necessary to stick to what little we know with archaeological and historical certainty.

This project was born thanks to the precious help and guidance of Daniela Pergreffi, Professor of Illustration at the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples, and the encouragement of the artist Daniela Matarazzo. The seven illustrated scenes - painted in watercolor - are characterized by a strong realism obtained through acute research of physiognomy, a solid volumetric setting of the figures, and a synthesis of forms. In regards to the representation of the environments, the need has arisen to contextualize the scenes; the architectural monuments present in them are citations of hypothetical reconstructions of places mentioned in the *Passio* (drawings by the archaeologists Luigi Canina, Pio Capponi and Venceslao Grossi). Each figure was followed by Professor Rosario Malizia, secretary of the office of Terracina of the Archeoclub of Italy; his collaboration, reflections, clarifications, and corrections have made it possible to place the characters (according to tradition) in the sites of the martyrdom of Cesario and to highlight the historical and archaeological findings. The new proposals on the dating of the martyrdom advanced by the archaeologist Pietro Longo of Terracina and his recent studies on the figure of the deacon have allowed us to expunge the Neronian and Domitian periods from our research and to continue the research into the characters mentioned in the Passion, some of which appear - with the same roles - in other Acts of the Martyrs.

*Giovanni Guida*

Cesa, 2015



## Cesario, a historical figure

There are several good reasons to deepen the hagiographic studies on Cesario or, according to other terms, Cesareo, a martyr whose existence is inconsistently documented, but can never be questioned. We are certain that he died during the era of persecutions. Therefore, Cesario of Terracina is unquestionably a historical figure; he is mentioned in the oldest list of Christian martyrs of the Latin Church, the "*Martyrologium Hieronymianum*" (a document from the first half of the 5th century), and his feast is marked on November 1st and April 21st, coinciding with the *Dies Natalis Romae*. In the "*Roman Martyrology*," he is also commemorated on November 1st with a eulogy taken from the narration of the *Passio*. The *Dies Natalis*, that is "the birth into heaven," of Cesario is also mentioned in other authoritative documents, namely the "*Gregorian and Gelasian Sacramentaries*" of Popes Gregory and Gelasius (ancient Christian liturgical books) and in the Martyrologies of Bede, Raban, Usuard and others. His feast is also marked in the ancient calendar of Father Fronto (Duc duFronton). All in all, we can say that historical evidence on the deacon Cesario is not lacking, but we cannot be certain about any events in his life, other than the martyrdom. If the martyr's historical authenticity is certain, his biography is instead entrusted to a *Passio* received by four editors: "*minima, parva, maior, maxima*," developed in the centuries of the first millennium. The "*Passio parva*", the closest to the reality of the facts, lends itself to be considered the most historically reliable because it is the oldest, ascribable to the V-VI century. In this era, a true literary genre flourished, one of epic and largely legendary passions, giving a signature physiognomy to the martyr, of whom, apart from his name, often only the date and place of his death were known - that is, the hagiographic details that allow for the identification of a saint. The martyrdom of Cesario occurs in the Neronian age (54-68 AD) according to the *Passio parva*, the Domitian age (81-96 AD) according to the *Passio maior*, and the Trajan age (98-117 AD) according to *Passio maxima*. Meanwhile, in the *Passio minima*, the period of the martyrdom is not specified.

When the writer of the Acts of the martyrdom of Cesario set to work, he was missing certain data, and so he filled the story in with unconfirmed details, giving it an especially dramatic setting. During these centuries, it is likely that the transformation of the so-called temple of Apollo of Terracina into a Christian temple dedicated to the martyr Cesario led to the need to write down the oral traditions of the Terracinese martyrs. The legend, in its present form, is certainly from Terracina. It was born to give importance to an episode in the early history of the local church. On the burial place of Cesario (in a land located in the Terracina Valley, in "Agro Varano"), a *Basilica ad corpus* was built, dedicated to Santa Maria and the Martyrs; it is the first and most important place of worship in the city, where catechumens were baptized since the emergence of Christianity. As we will see in this account of the Passion, we cannot consider every account to be of the same importance, such as pious legends, and of course, from time to time, we will differentiate between the historical features and those that are (or are presumed to be) legendary. We repeat, however, that we must not group all of these stories together because the writers of these acts existed many centuries ago and continually received these facts through oral tradition. In 1887, the Bollandist Guglielmo Van Hoff gave a very favorable opinion on this Passion, but today, opinions have changed. According to the archaeologist Giuseppe Lugli, in his archaeological - topographical commentary on the martyrdom of Cesario, the exact indication of the places is in every way remarkable, regardless of the historical and chronological value to be given to these Acts. The story seems to be written by a citizen; it is evident that the author knows the land well. The topography is exactly respected: Monte Sant'Angelo with its cliffs overlooking the sea, the Pisco Montano, the temple of Apollo, located on the top of a hill, and the Emilian Forum with the adjacent prison. We seem to see the successive episodes in the Passion pass before our eyes, framed in a real environment, in precise detail. So, all this proves that the tale was written by a competent person, at least in terms of the geography.

## An African deacon

We know little or nothing of Cesario's childhood; hagiographers and scholars - in the discussion below - have expressed contrasting opinions over the years. Cesario was born in northern Africa, specifically in Carthage, around 85 AD. He was the son of a mercenary and a noblewoman who, according to tradition, were descended from the "*Gens Julia*," the renowned Giulia family. His parents named him Cesario to show their devotion and allegiance to the emperor, also called Caesar. The name "Caesar" derives from the Latin Caesar (*Caesarius* and *Caesaria* in the imperial age), an adaptation of the Etruscan etymology aisor, meaning "great" or "divine."

According to the historian and hagiographer Mons. Francesco Lanzoni, the African heritage of the martyr might be an invention, a pure hypothesis of the author, or a vulgar tradition collected by the author and attributed to him through his work. It might also be assumed that the Passion of Cesario was penned by an African writer, a refugee in Italy from vandal persecution. The historian Albert Dufourcq says that the Passion was written during the Byzantine period. In this period, Rome and Carthage were surprised to find themselves "sisters" under the rule of Basileus (emperor) of Byzantium, and every day, relationships between those on the coast of Africa and that of Campania multiplied, a thousand bonds were intertwined; from here the belief originates that the deacon Cesario would have traveled this road to get to Terracina, the same road that carried soldiers, merchants, and travelers. Returning to the story, Cesario's ancestors settled in Carthage during the reorganization of the African territories by Julius Caesar, who founded a Roman colony in that city for Roman citizens who had been transferred there and were allied with the motherland and therefore, under the control of Rome. This colony thrived and profited from the connection and alliance with Imperial Rome, and Cesario, being an only child, was in a position to inherit a large inheritance, without any need to divide or split it.

His family converted to Christianity because of the fervent preaching of Jesus's apostles in the area. The young Cesario, after learning the Christian doctrine, was fascinated by the figure of Jesus and his message of salvation. Wanting to become one with Christ, he took the vow of the diaconate. In early Christianity, the Deacon (from the Greek διάκονος - diákonus, or servant) was one who placed himself in the community at the service of his neighbor, in an influential position of authority. Soon, the deacon became a recognized ministerial figure, joining the figures of the bishop and the presbyter.

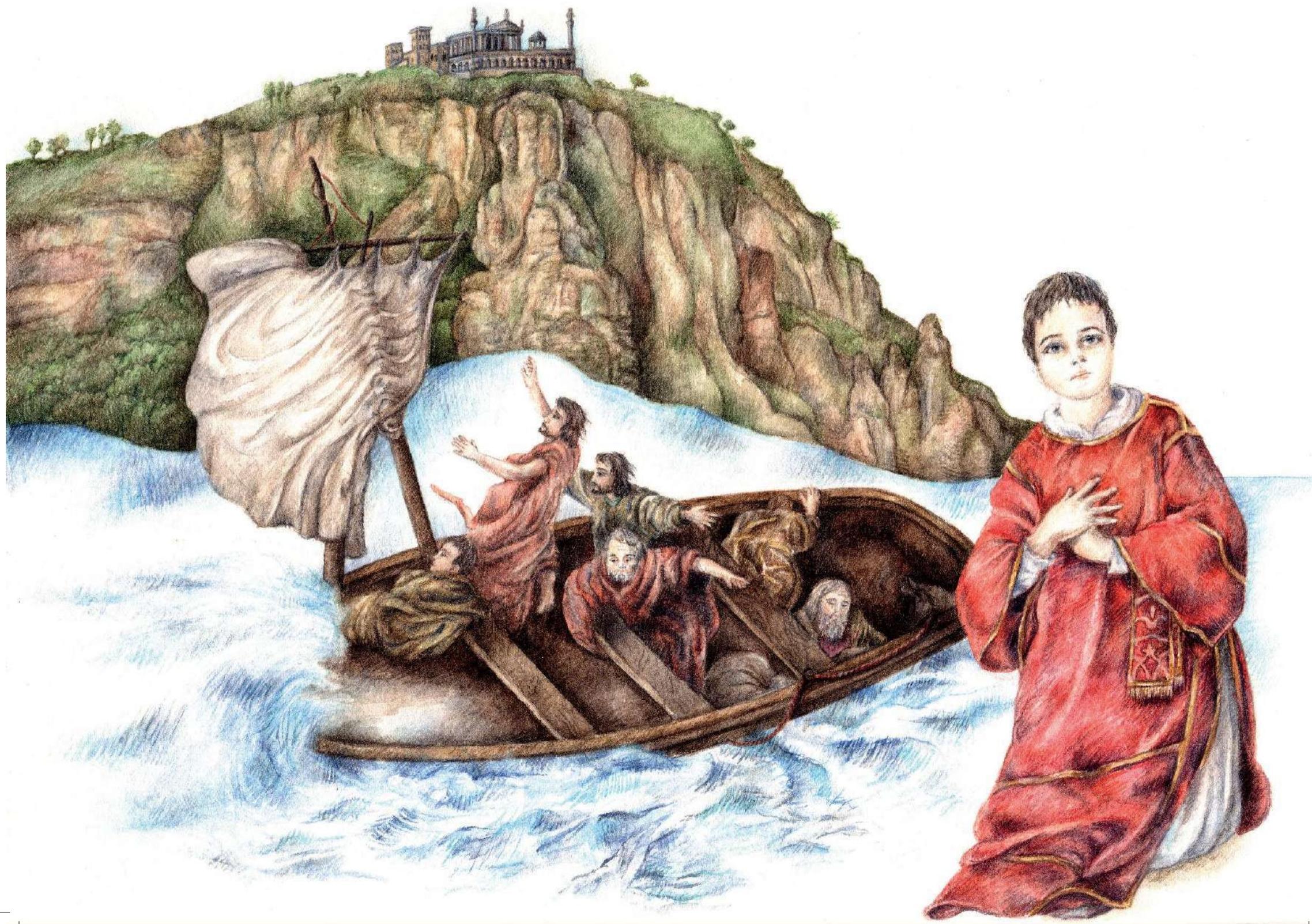
The deacon does not represent Christ as the high priest does and does not offer the Eucharistic sacrifice, but he represents Christ as the one who came "not to be served but to serve."

The Deacon is the living image of Christ who serves, who bends down to washing the feet of his disciples out of love, who bears the suffering of the weakest, who proclaims the word of the Kingdom from village to village, who draws close to anyone who is threatened by sadness and anguish, and who offers his own life in sacrifice. Cesario's job was to be a servant of the Word of God, of the table of the poor, and of the Eucharistic table. To the great amazement of his parents, he renounced his inheritance and, bolstered by his faith, dedicated himself to evangelization.

## Shipwreck in Terracina

After his adolescence, Cesario decided to leave with his companions for Rome, where Christianity was an illicit religion punishable by maximum penalties; Christ's faithful were accused, in particular, of impiety because they refused to make the legally required sacrifices to the gods of the official Roman religion. We should also remember that the refusal of Christians to worship the figure of the emperor (Caesar) as a god, in addition to the numerous pagan deities, condemned them as treasonous and atheistic. However, their ship was wrecked - due to a furious storm - on the coasts of Terracina, a city located at the southern end of the Agro Pontino and at the foot of the Ausoni Mountains, which here extend up to the coast separating the Pontine Plain from the smaller Piana di Fondi. The next day, his companions set off walking along The Appian Way towards the capital of the Empire, but Cesario decided to stop in the city, overwhelmed by the gap between the rich and poor; the sick, the oppressed, and the dying were left on the fringes of the city, while inside, the nobility lived in excessive luxury. The deacon took care of the poor, the weak, and the infirmed because he saw the picture of God in their faces. Cesario remained hidden in the city, in the house of Eusebius, a Christian monk and a servant of God: he was welcomed into the Christian community formed by Epaphroditus, a slave of Greek origins, the first bishop of Terracina in the mid-1st century after Christ. Epaphroditus was one of the seventy-two disciples (early followers of Jesus Christ), and he was ordained by the apostle Peter in 50 AD. According to the *"Passio parva,"* the martyrdom of Cesario took place in the Neronian period (54-68 AD), a dating also accepted by the famous German hagiographer Laurentius Surius. There is a clear attempt to bring our deacon closer to the historically proven passage of the apostles Peter and Paul through the city of Terracina. Paul's evangelization along the Appian Way is attested to in the Acts of the Apostles, which refer to his journey from Pozzuoli to Rome with stops in *Tres Tabernae* and in Foro Appio, in the Pontine area.

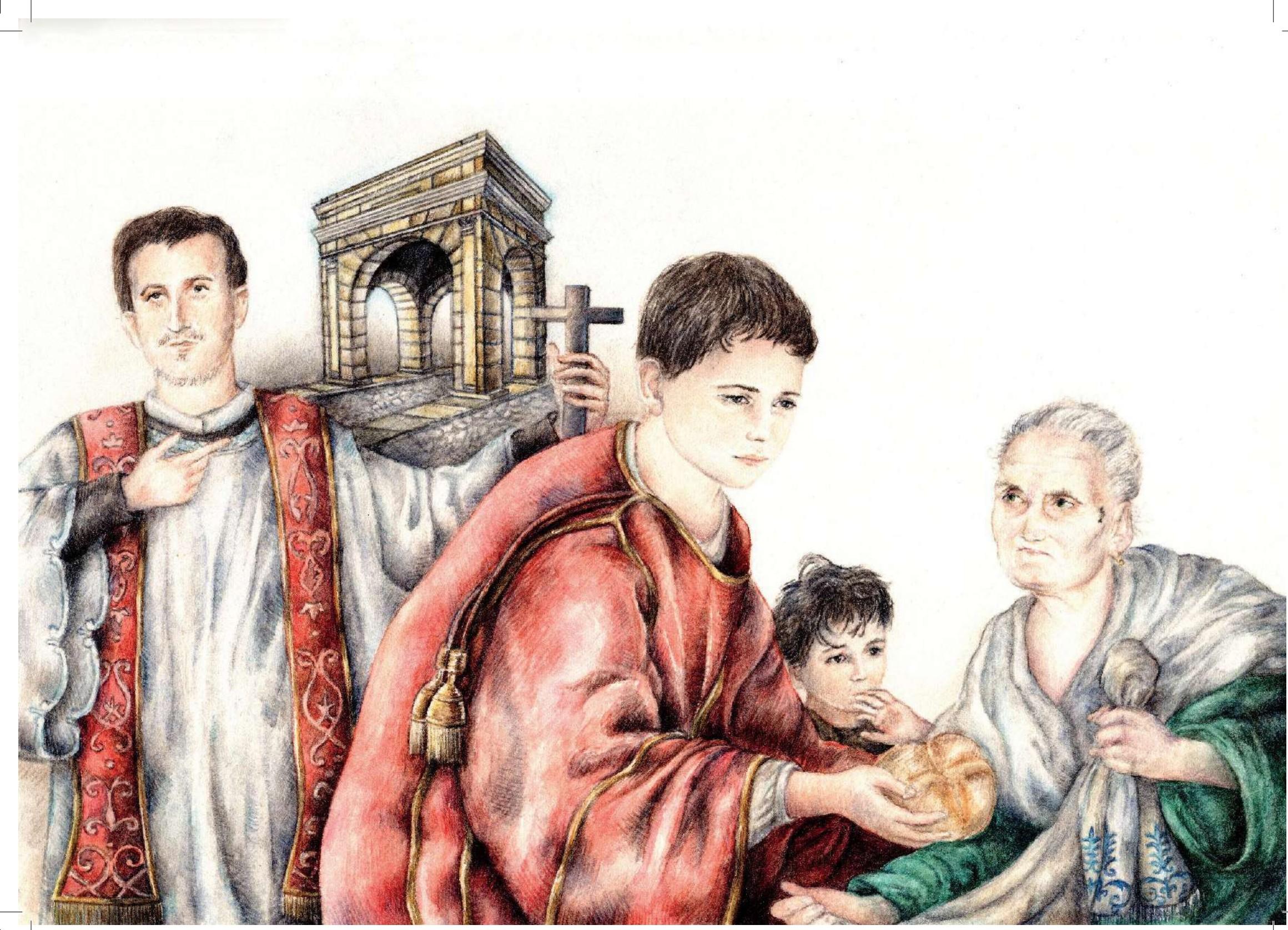
His stop in Terracina is mentioned in the apocryphal Acts of Peter and Paul of Pseudo Marcello: "*Leaving from Baia, they reached Gaeta, where Paolo began to teach the word of God. In fact, he stayed there for three days in the house of Erasmus, whom Peter had sent from Rome to preach the gospel of God. After leaving Gaeta, he arrived at the hamlet of Terracina. He stayed there for seven days in the house of the deacon Cesario, ordained by Peter. From here, he sailed across the river and arrived at a place called Tre Taverne.*" The chronological data provided by the narrator - Nero's persecution - is not accepted as a part of modern critical history, which shifts the date of the martyrdom of Cesario to 250 AD, during the persecution of Trajan Decius (249-251). This date, however, contrasts with the traditional chronology and with the periods of martyrdom according to the various *Passiones*. Consequently, the deacon - together with his companion and spiritual teacher, the presbyter Giuliano - decided to dedicate himself to the poorest part of the population. Cesario and Giuliano began their evangelization work in Terracina; they centered their mission on preaching, conversion, and the formation Christian communities in which everyone lived in love and freedom. They began to preach first by example and then with the word. At first, the people were rather wary of them, but they soon began to esteem them, to follow them, and many asked to be baptized. According to some historians, Cesario would be "the only authentic martyr" of Terracina, while the presbyter Giuliano would belong to the historical and cultural tradition of other churches. Lanzoni speculates that the author of the Passio describing the story of the young deacon drew a connection between our protagonist and the martyr Giuliano of Anazarbo, relating them and their deaths to each other and describing the same method of execution for both, that is the *poena cullei*. During the Middle Ages, in the territory of Sutri (Viterbo), the early reception of the *Passio sancti Cesarii* gave rise to the construction of the Church of San Cesario in Martula and later that dedicated to his companion Giuliano, located in district of Saccello.



## Domitilla, Eufrosina and Teodora

The Venerable Cesare Baronio, a Church historian, questions the Neronian period and takes into consideration the dating of the "*Passio maxima*," which places the martyrdom in the Trajan age because Cesario is also mentioned in the Acts of Saints Nereo and Achilleo, who were undeniably martyred under Emperor Trajan. The name of the deacon appears, as often happens in the cycle of epic passions, in the "*Acta Nerei et Achillei*" (ascribable to the V-VI century), as the one who took care of the burial of three virgins killed in Terracina. According to tradition, the noblewoman Domitilla, granddaughter of Flavio Clemente (consul in 95 AD), was converted to Christianity by her servants Nereus and Achilleus, who persuaded her to keep her virginal state. Aureliano, son of a Roman consul, fell in love with her beauty and, not knowing of her of her Christian choices, asked for her hand in marriage. When the girl refused, the young man did not give up; even more attracted and with his pagan pride wounded, he began to persecute the unfortunate Domitilla. Continually rejected, he went so far as to urge the emperor to exile her to Ponza, accusing her of "Judaism" (the name the Romans gave to the nascent Christianity). Under Domitian, Domitilla and her servants were confined to the island of Ponza; then, Nereo and Achilleo were transferred to Terracina, where they were beheaded by order of the consul Memmio Rufo, because they had refused to worship to the emperor. Aureliano turned to two young Romans of illustrious birth, Sulpizio and Serviliano, betrothed to the virgins Eufrosina and Teodora (who shared a nursemaid with Domitilla), to ask them to visit Domitilla and persuade her to marry him. During their visit, Eufrosina and Teodora converted to Christianity, following some miracles, and Sulpizio and Serviliano were baptized by Cesario and Giuliano, thanks to Domitilla's involvement. Aureliano organized a great party in honor of the pagan gods intending to force Domitilla to reciprocate his love, but at the height of the celebrations, he fell ill and died instantly. Thereafter, Domitilla also went to Terracina, where she resided with the two virgins, Teodora and Eufrosina.

At that time, in Terracina, the First Citizen was Lussurio, Aureliano's brother, who, to avenge his death, had Sulpizio and Serviliano brought to the prefect of Rome, Aniano, who ordered their beheading when they refused to offer incense to the idols. Then, Lussurio forced the virgins to sacrifice to the gods; their refusal brought about their martyrdom. The room where they had taken refuge was set on fire and all three died, burned alive. The next day, the deacon Cesario went to their room to verify their deaths: he was greatly shocked to see the three virgins were in a kneeling position, in prayer and adoration, and their bodies had not been burned by the fire. The other Christians helped him take their remains and put them in wonderful sarcophagi, which he buried in a deep pit, giving them worthy burials. There are some variations of this story in which it was not our deacon that buried the bodies of the virgins, but the deacon Ciriaco or an old man named Cesario. This text is an interesting testimony of the circularity of cults, their tendency to assimilate, and in particular to the close bond that united Terracina to Rome; Nereo, Achilleo, and Domitilla were buried in Rome, on the Via Ardeatina, in the catacombs built right on the land of Domitilla's family. On their burial site, an underground Basilica was built and dedicated to them, which is still visible in their namesake Catacomb. Lanzoni argues that the anonymous author of the *Acta Nerei* intended to honor a martyr of Terracina named Cesario through this account of the pretend burier of virgins. When compared to the time of the Terracine martyrs, the passion of Cesario and the *Acta Nerei* have no corroborating value; therefore, it is not necessary to believe that our martyr dates back to such remote antiquity. According to the archaeologist Pietro Longo, the names of Nereo, Achilleo and Domitilla can be easily cataloged as simple duplications of martyrs and, lacking precise historical-archaeological evidence, nothing prevents them from having been actually martyred in Terracina, but not buried by Cesario. An inscription placed in the Piazza Santa Domitilla in Terracina recalls that in 1619 a chapel was raised by Pomponio De Magistris - bishop of the city - in same place as the room where Domitilla was burned with her companions.



## Human sacrifice

Dufourcq, reading the various Passiones, notes that the deacon Cesario, in the first phase of his existence, was a very modest character: he was ordained a deacon by the apostle Peter and welcomed Paul of Tarsus into his house for seven days, after which "the apostle to the Gentiles" left and stopped for four days at Tre Taverne - a town in ancient Lazio on the Appian Way, about 50 km from Rome. The years pass, the memories fade, the traditions mix, and the humble deacon begins to emerge from his solitude; in fact, in the legend of Nereo and Achilleo, it is he who buried the three martyred virgins in Terracina. The Roman emperor Marcus Ulpius Nerva Traiano, reigning from 98 to 117 AD, decreed a persecution of the Christians; he ordered that anyone who refused to sacrifice to idols be executed. According to tradition, in Terracina at that time, there was a pagan priest named Firmino. Driven by an evil spirit, he took advantage of the citizens' ignorance to the true God to convince many young people to distinguish themselves with a courageous and bloody act, under the pretext of saving the state and the emperors. On January 1<sup>st</sup>, it was customary to celebrate a feast in honor of Apollo, during which the most handsome and noble young man in the city would sacrifice himself for the prosperity of the state; in doing so, the man was offered up to the deity Apollo to gain his favor and to invoke his support. The ancient custom was to care for the young man for six to eight months, feeding him with delicious foods and granting all his wishes, but at the end of that time, after being adorned with magnificent weapons and mounted on a richly harnessed horse, he would climb to the top of the mountain above the city and plummet into the sea to ensure his fame and immortal glory. Later, his body would be burned and his ashes stored with great honor in the temple of Apollo. That year, the young man destined for human sacrifice was called Luciano. When Cesario first saw Luciano, he asked his fellow citizens what it meant that he was surrounded by so much splendor; they replied: "*He is so treated because he must sacrifice himself.*" Cesario said: "*Please, in the name of God Almighty, explain to me what this means,*" and he was told the history of the tradition passed down by their ancestors.

The deacon was horrified, indignant at this barbarism and shouted: "*How unhappy and unfortunate you are! This fatal blindness that made you offer the souls of innocent men to the devil will prevent you from taking part in true life in this world and in the next.*" Cesario waited for the day appointed for the ceremony, praying and keeping vigil. On January 1st, the authorities, the pagan priests, and the faithful gathered in temple of Apollo to begin the rites: Luciano sacrificed a sow for the salvation of the city and its inhabitants. Subsequently, the procession began, winding towards the mountain with slow solemnity. Cesario turned to those present and exclaimed: "*If you are wise, why do you persist in committing such a crime? Do you think it is right to gain salvation by sacrificing an innocent person?*" Despite his various attempts to stop the crime, the barbarian rites were executed: Luciano rode up to the top of the hill, threw himself into the air with the recalcitrant horse, and crashed into the rocks, perishing in the waves along with his mount. After this shocking scene, Cesario shouted: "*Woe to the state and to the princes who rejoice in suffering and feed on blood! Why would you lose your souls for your deceptions and be seduced by the tricks of the devil?*" The false priest Firmino, having heard these words of the deacon, ordered him to be silent; he had him arrested by the guards and taken to the public prison near the Emilian Forum. From a historical point of view, the first unreliable element of this story is the question of human sacrifice, which was unlikely during the imperial period, especially in a city close to the capital, Rome. The Latin people usually rejected such aberrations of nature, and even if in the early days of Roman civilization such sacrifices sometimes took place, we know that the last of them dates back to the end of the third century BC, during the Second Punic War and after the Canne disaster. According to popular tradition, the sacrifice of Luciano and the subsequent martyrdom of Cesario would have occurred at the top of the "Pisco Montano" cliff.



The Pisco Montano is a rocky spur of 83 meters and constitutes an isolated geological structure as it is not incorporated into the Monte Sant'Angelo behind, whose summit is dominated by the temple of Jupiter Anxur. This presents a controversial question, since in the original text speaks generically of a mountain or a hill near the city. It would be quite difficult to get a horse with its rider up the Pisco; in fact, there is only one impervious path that leads to the narrow open space at the halfway point, where a guard post was built in the modern age to the Porta Napoletana below, popularly called "House of Mastrilli." The Jesuit Father Giovanni Frilli da Sezze adds details to this account: so, while the young man was diving, Cesario spread out his arms and fell from the top of the Pisco Montano, also known as "Red Turnip" and "Rivaroscia Cliff," without getting hurt. Once, in the Marina district, there was a church dedicated to Santa Barbara; a painting in that church depicted the deacon Cesario who - according to tradition - in that moment, saved the young man thrown from cliff with the gesture of his arms. According to Dufourcq, the episode of Luciano and the slaughtered sow appeared in tradition during the Byzantine era. The legend seems to be of Terracine origin because the sow was consecrated to the god Sylvan, particularly adored in that city; but the sow is also a sacred animal to the Great Goddess, particularly worshiped in Cappadocia. Luciano's story has a strong oriental flavor: the sweet luxuries of the life of the condemned prior to sacrifice recall the hedonistic and bloody cults of Phrygia and Cappadocia. Luciano's sacrifice, on the other hand, recalls the *devotio*, a religious practice of ancient Romans in which the commander of the Roman army sacrificed himself to the Dei Mani (god's hands) to obtain salvation and victory for his men in exchange for his own life. Luciano's story appeared after the conquest of Italy, that of Lazio with Terracina by the Byzantines of Belisario against the Ostrogoths (Greco-Gothic War, 535-553). The physiognomy of the *devotio* is evident in the text, but would cancel out the military character of the victim; some Byzantine soldiers, of Cappadocian origin, could have introduced to Terracina the "myths" of the pagan festivals of the calends, of which bishop Asterio of Amasea speaks in one of his homilies - showing the madness and the sins that were committed - and that our Christian hagiographer would have ingeniously utilized. Thus, the Luciano episode could be of Cappadocian origin and of Byzantine import.

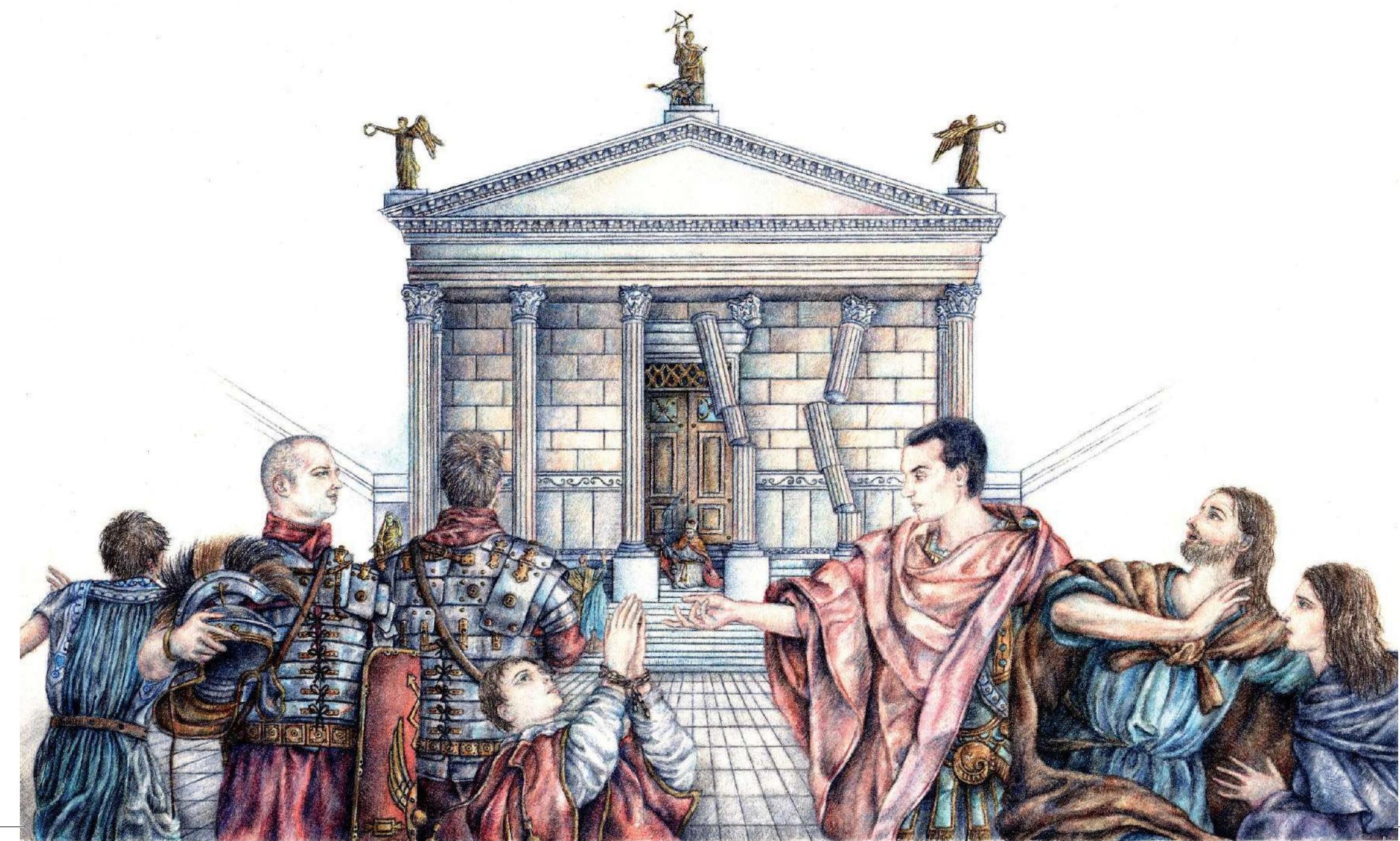
## The process

Eight days after the arrest of Cesario, Lussurio (the First Citizen of Terracina) and the priest Firmino brought in the consul Leonzio (*Consularis Campaniae*), who was then in the city of Fondi, to begin the trial and judge the young man. When the consul arrived, the guards brought the deacon Cesario, who had been left without food for three days, into the Emilian Forum. Cesario was accused of treason, as well as contempt for the state religion, high treason, and interruption of a sacred ceremony. In the middle of the forum, Leontius, through the herald, began the interrogation by saying: "*What's your name?*" and he replied: "*I am Cesario, a sinner and a deacon, although unworthy.*" The consul said: "*Are you free or a slave?*" and he said: "*I am a servant of my Lord Jesus Christ.*" The consul said: "*Do you know what the emperor has ordered?*" and the deacon replied: "*I don't know their orders.*". Leontius said: "*They order that sacrifices be offered to the immortal gods*" and he replied: "*Unhappy are they who have given such orders.*" Then the consul said: "*And for what reason? Because they are trying obtain salvation for the state?*" and he said: "*What you call the salvation of the Empire is your undoing.*" The consul said: "*In any case, religion is a source of salvation for all,*" and he replied: "*And what good does it do then for those whom you oblige to condemn themselves to death without having committed any crime?*" Consul Leontius said: "*Do what I advise you and sacrifice to the gods, or your obstinacy will soon be punished,*" and Cesario replied: "*Your torments do not impress me, but eternal suffering will affect you quite differently, since you will not escape it.*" Consul Leontius said: "*Let's go to the Temple of Apollo.*" As we can see, the dialogue between the judge and the accused is simple and straightforward. Cesario's interrogation does not appear to be the hardest; the magistrate limits himself to simply noting the status of the Christian and his refusal to worship the gods: no speeches, no strange details, no torture, for example, that the Romans did not use.

During trials, in the Latin-speaking areas, Christians were invited by the president of the court to swear in the name of the "Genius of Caesar." It seems clear that the unknown editor of the *Passio* read the epistle of Pliny the Younger addressed to Trajan where the circumstances of Cesario's interrogation are briefly stated. The Consular of Campania did not exist under Nero nor under Trajan (this charge is from the middle of the second century AD, and Terracina - at least until the middle of the third century AD - was never part of Campania). It is strange that, under Theodosius (379-395 AD), Terracina was assigned to Campania and not to Lazio. This can only be explained by the ease of communications at that time between the city and that region rather than with Rome, due to the poor condition of the marshes and the Appian Way; Campania, therefore, had a consul between 333 and 438, the first recorded one being Barbaro Pompeiano in 333. The names of the magistrates themselves, such as Leonzio, Lussurio, and Firmino, are inconsistent with the first century in the West, especially for men of a certain rank. The French historian Tillemont finds Lussurio and Leonzio in the *Passio* of the martyr Hyacinth of Porto, in very similar circumstances, but also with others that make it unlikely - as Baronio would like - to be set in the time of Trajan. It is interesting to note how the texts of the *Passio S. Caesarii minima* and of the *Passio S. Hyacinthi* have an interdependent relationship, both in form and in structure. The *Incipit* and the *Explicit* coincide; both begin with the interrogation of Leonzio, the questions asked by the magistrate and the accused's answers are similar, and the description of the death of Lussurio, or Lussorio, concludes the narratives. Consul Leonzio is also mentioned in other "Acts of the Martyrs" - primarily in those from Campania - as a judge who sentences to death Christians who refuse to sacrifice to the gods, including: Montano, soldier from Terracina, Giacinto of Porto, the virgins Archelaa, Tecla and Susanna (martyred in Nola), the citizens Fortunato, Caio and Ante from Salerno (martyred at the bank of the river Irno), Agape, virgin of Terni, Proculus, Efebo and Apollonio, and disciples of Valentino, bishop and martyr of Terni.

## Fall of the Temple of Apollo

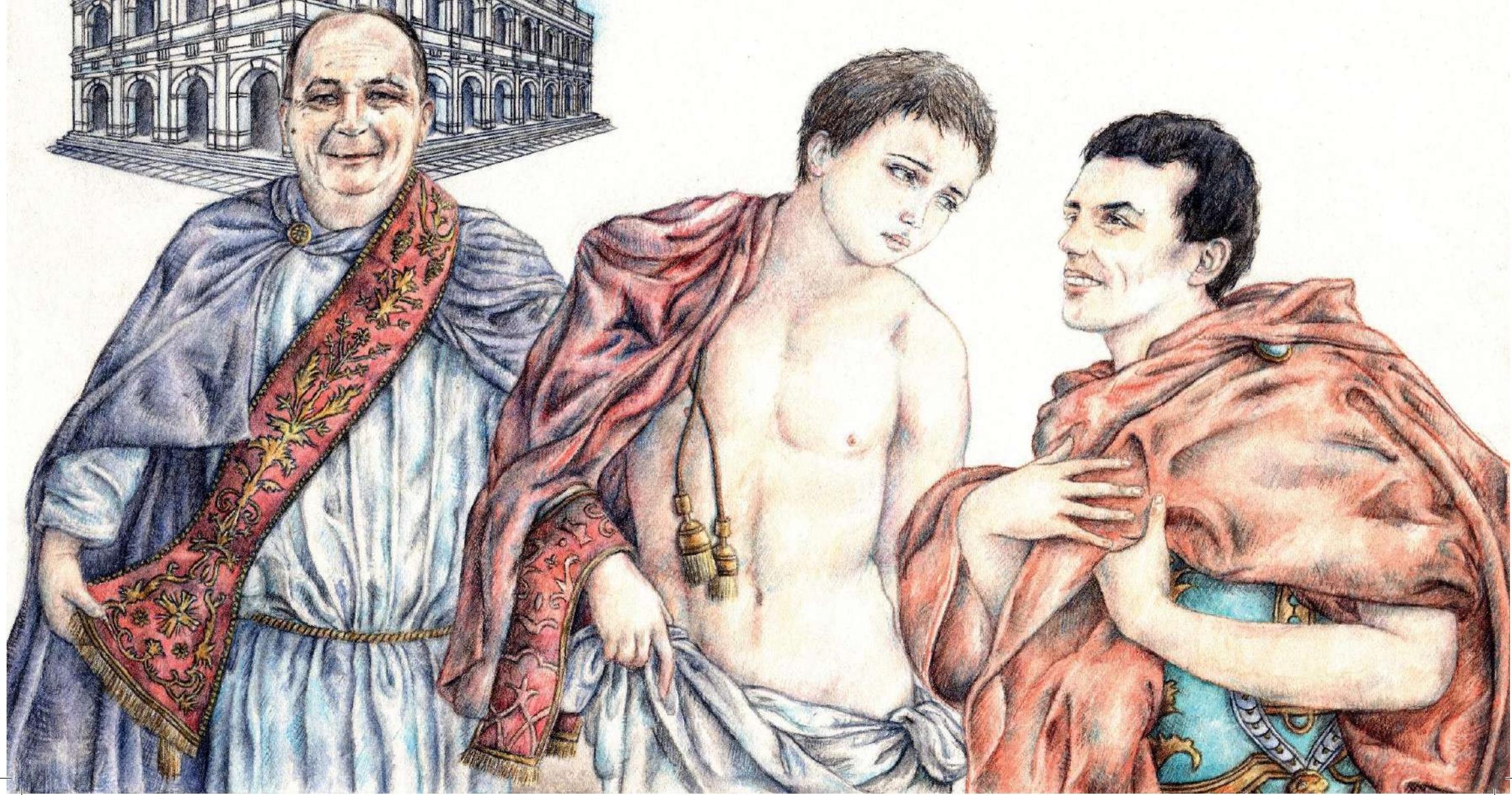
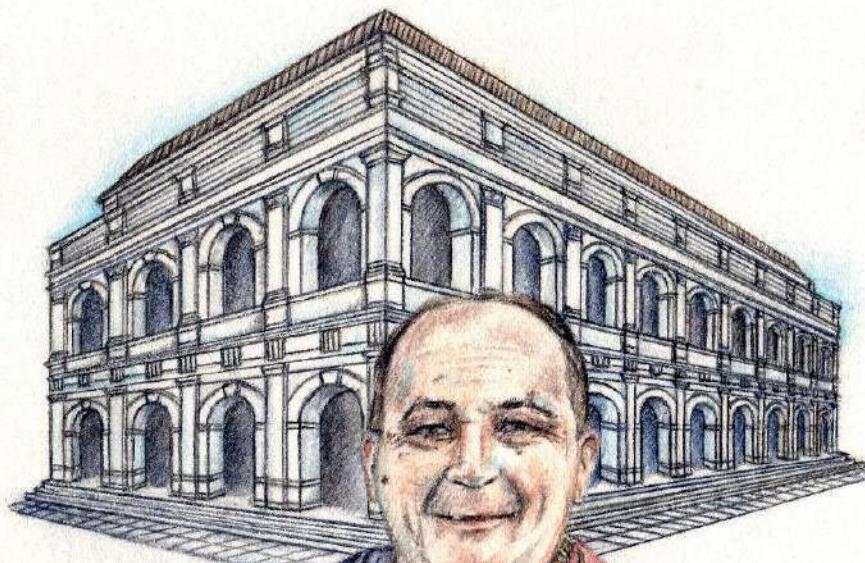
Consul Leonzio decided to bring Cesario in front of the temple of Apollo to order him to sacrifice to the gods: if he would deny his Christian faith and make this evident, offering prayers and incense to pagan divinities, he would be forgiven and set free because of his repentance. A letter sent to Pliny the Younger when he was governor of Bithynia testifies to the third persecution of Christians under Trajan. In this letter, the emperor dictates the ways in which the "Christian question" was to be treated: there was to be no active search for Christians, but, in case of denunciations, they had to be condemned if they refused to sacrifice to the gods. Cesario was tied to the chariot of Leonzio and, as soon as they approached the temple, the deacon, surrounded by soldiers, exclaimed: "*O God, Father of my Lord Jesus Christ, eternal King, to You all things are known. Do not abandon me, but deign to look at your servant who hopes in you.*" When he finished the prayer, the temple suddenly collapsed and, under its ruins, the pagan priest Firmino died. The collapse of the temple of Apollo corresponds to the collapse of the walls of Jericho: "*By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after they had gone around them for seven days*" (*Hebrews 11:30*). This episode is confirmed by numerous other narratives. In essence, the population was waiting for a sign of divine power from the thaumaturge; if it happened, they would be converted, otherwise they would continue to believe in traditional divinities. In the apocryphal acts of the apostle John, a very similar episode is described: one day, he entered the sanctuary of Artemis in Ephesus and prayed to the Lord. Immediately, the pagan altar shattered, and half of the temple collapsed causing many conversions to Christianity. According to legend, the soldier George of Lydda also entered a pagan temple; he murmured a prayer to the Lord and knocked down the idols of stone with a breath. According to the four *Passiones*, Cesario was led to the middle forum, near the main temple; for a long time, the current Cathedral of Terracina was identified as the temple of Apollo because the text specifies that the building that collapsed on the priest Firmino was the *Templum Apollinis*.



The erroneous identification of the temple of Apollo was already present at the beginning of the 16th century in the drawings by Baldassarre Peruzzi, later taken up by the Terracinese historian Domenico Antonio Contatore and others; it is likely that it derives from a mistaken topographical interpretation of the facts narrated in the *Passio di Cesario*, as reiterated in recent studies on the monument. The Cathedral of Terracina - dedicated to the deacon Cesario on November 24, 1074 - was built by incorporating structures from the Great Temple of the Roman city, located on the north-west side of the Emilian Forum. A generic attribution is preferred because we don't know for sure to which divinity it was dedicated; modern archeology identifies it in the Capitolium or in the temple of Rome and Augustus. With Theodosius (379-395), Christianity became the state religion, and the emperor granted Christians the use of pagan temples, so, starting from the 5th century, the transformation of the pagan temple into the Basilica of St. Cesario began. In the Cathedral, at present, there are no traces of a collapse, but only of a fire on the marble slabs of the external lining of the cell, possibly dating back to late antiquity. Lugli, on the other hand, hypothesizes that the temple of Apollo was located on the top of a hill. The hagiographic sources speak of an ancient cult of Apollo, also said to be Anxur like Jupiter. Tradition says that, under Nero, a young man was sacrificed to this god, the most beautiful of Terracina, who threw himself while riding from the top of a cliff. Whether the legend is true or false, the topographical indication remains important, leading us to believe that the temple was located in a prominent place, which, excluding Monte Sant'Angelo (probably the site of the cult of Jupiter), can be recognized as the hill of St. Francesco. In fact, it is only natural that an elevated place such as the hill of St. Francesco - once the acropolis of the city, then passed into the second one in line with the creation of the new acropolis of Monte St. Angelo in the age of Silla to Apollo - was dedicated to Apollo, an important divinity of the city. It is likely that it was not a real temple, but an open sanctuary, consisting only of an altar with its themenos. On the other hand, Lugli's claim that the cult of Apollo is the oldest in the city is hypothetical, not being cited by any ancient source, but only by the *Passio*; moreover, there are no certainties in the identification of the temple on the hill of St. Francesco, since the mosaic inscription that was found in the 19th century and has now disappeared only makes reference to the restoration of the building carried out by a local magistrate, most likely in the second century BC, without any mention of the tutelary deity.

## Conversion of Consul Leonzio

When Lussurio learned of this supernatural event, he went immediately to Terracina and exclaimed: "*Is it true, Leonzio, that Cesario has used his magic spells?*" "It's true," replied Leonzio, and addressing Cesario, he said: "Today you will feel the effects of my anger." The deacon replied: "I fear neither you nor your emperor: it is true, as you say, that your anger will be inflamed today, but it will vanish tomorrow, and when you are dead, you will not be able to do anything." Lussurio interrupted these words and exclaimed: "Oh what, Leonzio, do you hear this wretch throwing insults against our emperor, and you still hesitate to annihilate him?" Consul Leontius said: "What kind of torture do you want to impose?" and Lussurio replied: "Why don't we summon all the people to the temple where he wielded his magic?" The pagans saw the effects of magic in the miracles, in the extraordinary events that took place among Christians. So all the people met at the temple, they exposed the corpse of the priest Firmino, and Lussurio addressed these words to the multitude: "You see before you this ungodly man, who fears neither gods nor princes, who has just killed the pontiff and destroyed the sacred temple built by our ancestors with his witchcraft." Deacon Cesario exclaimed: "It is right, my brothers, to obey a man, rather than God the Sovereign Master of the Universe. What is this religion that demands the shedding of human blood to procure the salvation of your homeland? I ask you to do penance for the innocent blood that has been shed; I urge you to believe in Christ, the Son of God, and serve him." All the people shouted: "He is a virtuous man, and what he asks of us is right." Lussurio had him taken back to the prison, where he was left for a year and a day. According to the author of the *Passio*, the prison - or custody - was located near the same forum: nothing has yet come from archaeological research, and, if it was really located near the Emilian Forum, it would have been replaced by or incorporated into constructions of a later period.



After a year, Lussurio sent a messenger to Leonzio to consult on type of punishment to be inflicted on the young deacon. The consul decided to have the accused brought back to the *Forum civitatis Terracinae*; Cesario came out of prison emaciated from hunger and stripped of his clothes but covered with long hair. During Cesario's captivity, an Angel of the Lord had watched over him day and night. When he was brought to the center of the forum, he told the soldiers who were keeping him inside chains: "*I want to pray; loosen my chains a little, so that I can give thanks to my Lord Jesus Christ, who deigned to number me among his servants.*" He immediately fell to the ground and worshiped the Lord, saying: "*Lord, my God, Father of my Lord Jesus Christ, show us your mercy.*" At that moment, a celestial light appeared and illuminated the whole body of the young deacon.

Seeing this, Consul Leonzio cried out in a loud voice: "*The God who Cesario preaches is truly the Lord Almighty.*" He threw himself at the deacon's feet, took off his chlamys, dressed Cesario, and begged him, in front of all the people, to baptize him. Cesario said: "*Believe, and you will soon see a radiant Light.*"

Then, he took water and baptized Leonzio in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, while the presbyter Giuliano - who was present there - administered the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

After receiving these sacraments, Giuliano recited a prayer over his head, after which Leonzio died. Leonzio's body was saved by his wife and children, who buried him in "Agro Varano", near the city, *III Kal. Nov.* (October 30th). From the text, it is evident that Leonzio was buried shortly before entering the city, clearly *extra urbem*, but very close to it. We do have some idea where the meetings of early Christians took place and where their cemetery were located.

The area indicated by the toponym "in Agro Varano" belonged to a wealthy Roman-Terracinese family, the Vari ("Gens Vara").

This family, who converted to Christianity, offered their home for meetings about the word of God and for celebrations of the Eucharist. The *Domus Christiana* of the Vari stood at the current Terracina railway, along the via Appia Antica, where the new church of the Terracinesi Martyrs is now located. Being located near the Appia, this house was very busy day and night, so it wouldn't have drawn too much attention to those who went there. In this field, the Christians also had their cemetery. Roman law allowed funeral associations (*collegia funeraticia*) to own cemeteries. Therefore, the day after his martyrdom, Cesario himself was placed in a cemetery that was already functioning on the property of the priest Quarto of Capua. The first Christian church in the city, dedicated to *St. Maria ad Martyres*, was erected on the tomb of Cesario: Santa Maria on the tombs of the martyrs, the same title as the Christianized Pantheon. The idea that it could have been a funerary building is indirectly traceable to the presence of Roman burials in the area, some of which were defined as "late." That land became one of the assets of the Cathedral and the local was and is called "Le Prebende."

According to others Passiones, had it not been for the miraculous conversion and death of Leonzio, he would have remained a harsh persecutor and would have also killed the virgins Rosina and Silvia and the soldier Montano. According to the archaeologist Francesco Maria Pratilli, after the death of our Leonzio, it was Consular of Campania Virio Turbone. Leonzio of Terracina is venerated as a saint and a confessor by the Catholic Church.

## *Poena Cullei*

On the same day of Leonzio's burial, Lussurio arrested the presbyter Giuliano and sentenced him to death: he ordered that Cesario and Giuliano be closed in a sack and thrown into the sea. The author of the Acts does not have a clear idea of the functions of the Roman magistrates: the interrogations are made and the judgments pronounced indifferently by Leonzio and by Lussurio, a procedure that is contrary to the highly juridical spirit of the Romans. The "*Poena Cullei*" (from the Latin "punishment of the sack") in Roman criminal law was the penalty imposed on a person who had committed parricide. Immediately after the sentencing, the offender was put in prison pending execution. Those guilty of parricide, sources say, were made to wear wooden clogs ("*soleae ligneae*"), and a wolfskin hood was tied around their face. The condemned was then whipped with "*virgae sanguineae*," sewn into a "*culleus*" (a waterproof leather sack) together with a viper, a dog, a rooster, and a monkey, was transported through the city in a cart drawn by a black ox, and was thrown into the sea. Three days later - just before being sentenced - Cesario said to Lussurio: "*The water in which I was reborn will receive me as a child of him who has found in it a second birth: today he will make me a martyr with Giuliano, my Spiritual Father, who once made me a Christian. As for you, Lussurio, you will die today of a snake bite, so that all countries will know that God will avenge the blood of his servants and the virgins who were killed in the flames.*" It was November 1st (*Kalendae Novembrīs*) of the year 107 AD: the condemned were closed in a sack (*missi in saccum*) and thrown, according to tradition, from the top of the peak of the "Pisco Montano" into the sea (*praecipitati sunt in mare*), where they died of suffocation. This date has been proposed by many hagiographers and scholars to link the martyrdom of the deacon to that of Nereo, Achilleo, and Domitilla, even though it is not possible to establish historical evidence. According to the archaeologist Pietro Longo, the "*Passio maxima*" is unreliable because it is too verbose and full of "pious interpolations" prone to exalt Cesario. The connection between the martyrdom of our deacon and that of Nereus, Achilleo, and Domitilla was born as these four martyrs turned out to all be linked to Pope Damasus (366-384), who handled the transport of Cesario's body from Terracina to Rome ("*Sanatio Gallae et translatio S. Caesarii Romam*") and wrote a poem in honor of the SS. Nereo and Achilleo.

The archaeologist claims that the martyrdom of Cesario would have instead occurred on July 13<sup>th</sup> of the year 250 AD - or in the four previous days, from the 9th to 13th - because during that period, Romans celebrated the *Ludi Apollinari*, which owe their name to the god to whom they were dedicated, Apollo. These were held annually for a period of eight days, from July 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13th, and they were only held in the circus on the last day. Longo, therefore, assumes that the deacon would have been immolated to Apollo in the amphitheater of Terracina. In March or April of 250, the emperor Messius Trajan Decius (249-251) proclaimed the edict of Libellus, stating that every family must solemnly and publicly proclaim, through sacrifice, their devotion to the pagan divinities thus receiving the "*libellus*," a sort of certificate attesting to their status as followers of the ancient state cults and thereby their devotion to Rome. The Libellus did not have Christianity as its only target because other religious communities (devoted to Egyptian and Asian cults) were also obliged to sacrifice. Some Christians abjured their religion and were called lapsi (from the Latin *lapsus*, error), others tried to receive the libellus without making the sacrifice, and others chose martyrdom. The known "*libellus*" are all collected between the dates June 12<sup>th</sup> - July 14<sup>th</sup>, 250. Lanzoni speculates that the martyrdom of Giuliano of Anazarbo would have provided our author the "colors" to describe that of Cesario and Giuliano di Terracina. Giuliano of Anazarbo was closed in a sack full of sand, scorpions, and poisonous snakes and thrown into the sea, where he suffocated on June 21/22, 249 AD. Therefore, the elements that these two stories have in common are: a sack, the sea, and - as we shall see - a poisonous snake. Recent studies confirm the hagiographic and iconographic tradition: the deacon Cesario was martyred when he was a young adult, between the ages of 18 and 22 years old. As for the Pisco Montano - the execution theater - it was always considered the landscape emblem of Terracina, and perhaps the legend was born to link this cliff to the city's protector, starting from his intervention on behalf young Luciano (January 1st) until his martyrdom (November 1st).



On the same day as the martyrdom, the waves brought the bodies of Cesario and Giuliano back to shore, where they were found next to that of Lussurio; thus, the prophecy of the deacon came true. After the execution of the sentence of our martyrs, the First Citizen was going to his country house, where he wanted to dine, and was taking the road that ran along the shore; as he passed under a tree, a snake fell on his back (*a serpent percussus*) and slipped between his neck and his tunic, tearing at his hips with cruel bites. Through his chest, it penetrated his heart, injecting his body with poison. The unfortunate fell and his body swelled horribly, but before he died, he saw the angels of heaven who welcomed the souls of Cesario and Giuliano. The monk Eusebius, who had lived with them, collected their precious relics and buried them in Terracina, in Agro Varano, on the day of the calends of November. For five days, Eusebius fasted and remained to recite psalms and to pray over their tombs. Upon seeing this, many inhabitants of Terracina went to this place, not far away from the city; many converted and were baptized by the presbyter Felice. Meanwhile, the new judge was Leonzio II, son of the consul converted by deacon Cesario. When Leonzio II, angry over the death of his father, learned these facts, he sent soldiers to arrest Felice and Eusebio and had them led into the forum in the presence of all the people. Then the trial began, in the presence of the highest civil and religious authorities of the city. He questioned them saying: "Are you free or slaves?" and the presbyter Felice he replied: "*We are servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Leonzio said: "*What are your names?*" and they said: "*We are called Eusebio and Felice.*" Leonzio said: "*Why do you preach senseless doctrines that are contrary to the salvation and the principles of the State?*" and Felix replied: "*The doctrine we preach is not senseless: it is true and sound doctrine which obliges us to know and to serve God. If you want to know him, you too will be allowed to obtain eternal life.*" Leonzio said to the people: "*What do you think?*"; some shouted that their doctrine was good, others that it only served to seduce men.

The new judge ordered them to be taken back to prison, and at night, he sent some people to force them to sacrifice to the gods, but they refused and sang: "*Glory to God in the highest heaven.*" Therefore, Leonzio ordered them to be beheaded and their bodies thrown into the river. The river carried their mortal remains to the sea, and the next day, the waves pushed them back to the shore, near the Pineta. It is here that the priest Quarto of Capua, leaving to go to his house in the countryside, found the beheaded bodies of martyrs; he put them on his chariot, began searching carefully for their heads (which he found the next day), and gave them worthy burials near the tombs of the martyrs Cesario and Giuliano.

**Cesario's life does not end in that sack, but he continues to live on today thanks to the devotion and admiration of the people of God; with the strength and determination of a young man, Cesario managed to change the thinking of this city full of idols.**

**He taught us to defend the dignity of life and freedom at all costs, and he wasn't afraid to get into that sack to demonstrate that there is no greater love than giving one's life for others and to bear witness to Christ with his life.**

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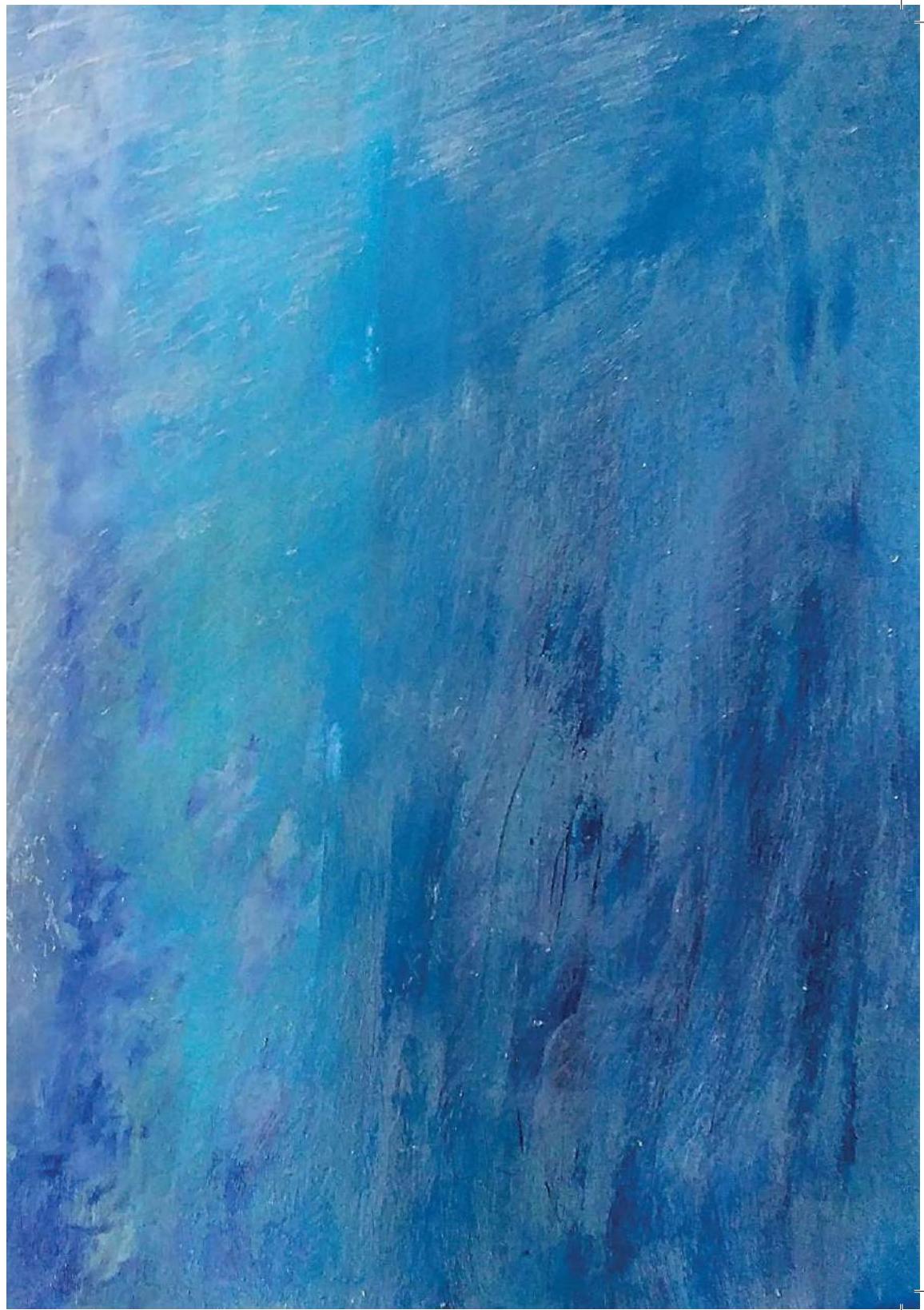
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## **Index**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Preface</b>                          | pag. [9]  |
| <b>Cesario, a historical figure</b>     | pag. [12] |
| <b>An african deacon</b>                | pag. [14] |
| <b>Shipwreck in Terracina</b>           | pag. [16] |
| <b>Domitilla, Eufrosina and Teodora</b> | pag. [20] |
| <b>Human sacrifice</b>                  | pag. [24] |
| <b>The process</b>                      | pag. [29] |
| <b>Fall of the Temple of Apollo</b>     | pag. [31] |
| <b>Conversion of Consul Leonzio</b>     | pag. [35] |
| <b><i>Poena Cullei</i></b>              | pag. [40] |
| <b>Bibliography</b>                     | pag. [46] |



*At Terracina in Italy it was an impious and barbarous custom, on certain very solemn occasions, for a young man to make himself a voluntary sacrifice to Apollo, the tutelar deity of the city. After having been long caressed and pampered by the citizens, apparelled in rich gaudy ornaments, he offered sacrifice to Apollo, and running full speed from this ceremony, threw himself headlong from a precipice into the sea, and was swallowed up by the waves. Caesarius, a holy deacon from Africa, happened once to be present at this tragical scene, and not being able to contain his zeal, spoke openly against so abominable a superstition. The priest of the idol caused him to be apprehended, and accused him before the governor, by whose sentence the holy deacon, together with a Christian priest named Julian, was put into a sack, and cast into the sea.*

**Giovanni Guida** (born 1992) is an Italian artist, painter and illustrator. His pictorial works are made with the technique of grattage.

In 2016–2017, his painting "*Caesarius Diaconus*" (icon of Caesarius of Terracina, tutelary saint of Roman emperors) was exhibited in famous museums, cathedrals and basilicas in the world (Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Corsica, Germany, United States of America, England, Israel, Philippines, Croatia and Slovakia).

